

# Positive Spring Break for Black college students

By: Ron Walters  
—Guest Columnist—

We live during a time when we have doubted the commitment of Black students to help elevate the condition of the less fortunate among us. Some of this ambiguity has been focused on college students whom we believe should know better.

They have access to the written and video legacy of past examples of individuals who have engaged in selfless struggle to advance the race so that successive generations could progress. So, this post-Civil Rights Movement generation has been pummeled for the apparent lack of struggle in their DNA and their permissiveness in allowing aspects of racism to persist by often adopting neoliberal attitudes that allow them to fit in with their White peers. Therefore, to many, their strong response to the Katrina disaster this Spring Break has been surprising.

The alternative Spring Break projects began several years ago, when press attention to thousands of students descending on places like Daytona Beach, Fla. To engage in beer-laden orgies revealed a vacuous set of values. To counter this image and the substance of this period, universities began to permit credit for positive internships, or travel abroad experiences, or other types of productive work projects.

This year, while college students have been better known for trucking to plush hideaways in Latin America, or on sunny beaches in Florida, many have dedicated themselves to working in the American Gulf to make the people damaged by Hurricane Katrina whole. Because of this desire, MTV and United Way sponsored a special project that attracted students at many universities, and subsequently more than 35,000 students participated—a welcome response by students of all colors.

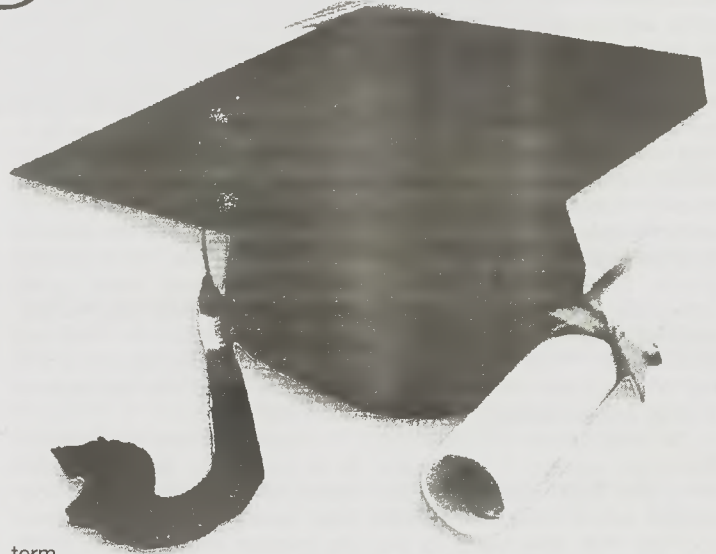
However, when the media began to focus on this event, stories emerged that featured students at predominantly White universities, and as I looked at the number of students involved, they ranged from 12 to 78 each from about 50 universities.

But nearly 250 students from Howard University alone became involved—a number that school officials said quadrupled that of any similar period in the past. Press interviews with these students revealed a strong motivation to affect change in the region, by partnering with Habitat for Humanity to mentor students, rebuild homes, clean houses, remove debris and paint. This was reported to be empowering work, both for the students who participated and those families and individuals who assisted. In this instance, at least one major TV network

recognized the uniqueness of this contribution. ABC's "World News Tonight" named the Howard students its "People of the Week."

It should also be noted that students went from other HBCUs, including Morgan State University. Morgan called their project "Katrina On The Ground." HBCUs in the Atlanta area sent not only significant sums of money, but also their choirs and other resources into the area. In addition, many of these institutions (Howard again in the lead) accepted many students from the Gulf region on a temporary basis, in an illustration of family solidarity. It was a positive gesture of leadership of these often-maligned institutions.

In truth, many of the HBCUs stepped up when the religious community has lagged. And although some such as the Progressive National Baptist Church has been involved since Katrina hit, this long-



term commitment has not been matched by many of the other religious institutions. This is important because of the long-term spiritual and material needs required by the victims of Katrina, who find themselves thrown out of temporary hotel living quarters, still confused by the whereabouts of relatives, still suffering from illnesses, still unable to return, build and work, and unable to exercise their rights as citizens.

I applaud the students and their institutions that have helped in the Gulf. As one who spent most of his professional career at Howard University, I am aware of the effort such institutions make to inculcate a commitment of service to community in their students. It is marvelous to see that it survives, because it is one of the strengths of their legacy, a reason why they continue to exist, a formidable reason why they are needed and why they should flourish.

(Ron Walters is the director of the African American Leadership Institute and professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland College Park.)

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